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Portrait of a (Would-be) Lady

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In Henry James's prologue to *The Turn of the Screw*, his character Douglas acknowledges that for a ghost in a story to appear to a child rather than to an adult gives "the effect another turn of the screw."[1] Having agreed that this is the case, Douglas asks his listeners what the effect would be of having the ghost appear not to one child but to two. "Somebody exclaimed" that the effect of doing so would be to "give [the screw] two turns" (145). James, however, rather than stopping at two twists, gives the screw a third revolution. He does so by making the protagonist of his tale a governess.

As Daniel Pool has noted, "... although the governess was expected to have the education and mien of a 'lady,' she was treated as a servant."[2] Thus, governesses were on the cusp between classes, now drawn up the ladder, now knocked back down; their class-identity was inherently unstable. That their class-identity was unstable, that it could change, and could do so for better or for worse, forced these women to be, if not exactly class-conscious, always conscious of class. The governess featured in *The Turn of the Screw*, whose class-obsessed sensibility is the prism through which the events of the tale are refracted, is no exception. Always present in the mind of this character, class is also always present in the novel she narrates.

More precisely, it is not simply class that is present, but class-anxiety. Because their position was unstable, governesses were free to indulge their novel-nourished dreams of making an advantageous marriage and thus rising above the drudgery and dependency of their lot. These dreams—and they were seldom more than that—were counterbalanced, indeed overbalanced, by the very real nightmare that, rather than rising to the aristocracy, a governess might descend to the streets. In the governess-narrator of *The Turn of the Screw* James gives us a convincing portrait of a would-be lady worried in exactly this way.

We see this first in the pains she takes to differentiate herself from those unambiguously of the serving classes. The adjectives she chooses in giving her first impression of Mrs. Grose are, in this regard, telling. She describes the housekeeper as being

1 Henry James. *The Aspern Papers and The Turn of the Screw.* London: Penguin Books. 1986 (first published in 1898). (145). All quotations from *The Turn of the Screw* will be drawn from this edition and noted in the text.

2 Daniel Pool. *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist—the Facts of Daily Life in 19th-Century England.* New York: Simon & Schuster. 1993. (225).

a "stout simple plain clean wholesome woman" (153). Although she is apparently unaware of how condescending her choice of descriptors is, it is clear that the first three in the series are intended to establish that Mrs. Grose is not as beautiful or sophisticated as the governess imagines herself to be, and therefore will not compete with her for the favors of her fantasy lover, the master of Bly. Further, that the governess finds Mrs. Grose's hygiene and virtue remarkable enough to mention suggests that she imagines cleanliness and wholesomeness to be exceptional in members of the lower classes and illuminates her anxiety about possibly being taken for a member of that dirty and depraved estate.

The flip side of the governess's anxiety about the lower classes is her attitude toward the little aristocrats under her care. Upper class Flora cannot, for the governess, be simply beautiful—a peasant's child might be that—but must be "the most beautiful child I had ever seen" (152-153). Likewise Miles, transcending even his sister's comeliness, is "something divine" (161), "an angel" (168). For the governess the seraphic Miles is, therefore, a creature of a superior order, an order to which she too yearns to belong. This yearning is not, however, merely a wistful fantasy. The novels that have formed her consciousness have convinced the governess that for her to belong to Miles's class is, in fact, a real possibility.

Thus, as the first appearance of Quint's ghost fits neatly into the plot the governess would like to believe she is living, the apparition does not exactly horrify her. Evoking both the gothic blockbuster *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and *Jane Eyre*, the classic account of a virtuous governess and "an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement" (166), the governess makes it clear that she sees her life as conforming to a literary model, a model that leaves plenty of room for the uncanny. Further, and more significant, the governess's literary model is one according to which it is not only possible, but normal for humble governesses to jump classes. Though Quint's second appearance is more unsettling than the first, the governess comforts herself by determining to use the ghost to draw herself closer to the children, the only aristocrats within easy reach, and the strongest link to their uncle. She hopes that by assigning herself the role of their protector—"The more I saw the less they would" (179)—she will not only retain her position as heroine of the tale, but make herself a necessary member of their world, their class.

The horror the governess feels as a result of the third visitation, this time by Miss Jessel, is much more intense, and comes about for an entirely different reason than that occasioned by either of the male ghost's first two appearances. Unlike her experiences with Quint, it is not primarily Miss Jessel's ghost which dismays her but rather the little girl's reaction to it. In what the governess takes to be Flora's pretense that she doesn't see the wraith, the governess recognizes that Flora and her brother not only know about the ghosts, but are comfortable in the world the ghosts inhabit. That the aristocrats are at ease in a world which both horrifies the governess and in which she has no place is, as she shrieks, "too monstrous" (182). It is a confirmation of a stricture she had always known

about but had wanted to believe did not apply to her: there are aspects of the aristocratic world to which servants are not privy. Having willfully forgotten that the children's place is not her place, that the children's class (and, by extension, that of their uncle) is not her class, she is shocked when, politely and gently, the well-bred children begin to exclude her.

Mrs. Grose, on the other hand, would never find such exclusion shocking. Illiterate, and therefore immune to novelistic suggestions that she might, through marriage or any other mechanism, become an aristocrat, she does not question her place in the social hierarchy, a place by definition walled-off from the aristocratic world of her employer in just the same way that her below stairs world is off limits to him. It is only a member of the relatively new and striving middle classes such as the governess who could believe it both possible and desirable to vault class barriers. In this conviction that class barriers were not immutable the governess and the class she represents were, as history confirms, correct, but not, perhaps, in the way the governess might have hoped. Members of the middle classes did not rise, as the governess would have liked, to join the aristocracy; rather, the middle class rose to displace the aristocracy, making it at best an irrelevant anachronism. As the English middle classes came to be seen as "the wealth and intelligence of the country, the glory of the British name,"[3] "the upper, or higher part of the model virtually disappears."[4]

Reflecting this historical reality, the aristocrats in *The Turn of the Screw*, one by one, vanish. First to go, of course is the uncle who, after the prologue, all but leaves the novel except insofar as he populates the fantastic imaginings of the governess. Much later, at the end of section twenty-one, little Flora disappears, and the governess is left alone with Miles, the sole remaining representative of the upper classes, and Miles, as his angelic aspect implies, is the most elevated of James's patricians. Just as historically the middle class killed off the aristocracy or, in making them irrelevant, did the next best thing, James's middle class governess kills Miles. "... His little heart," as James puts it in the novel's final sentence, "dispossessed, had stopped" (262). "Dispossessed" is a curious adjective to use with regard to a heart, either beating or still. By choosing to employ it, though, James highlights the fact that he is writing not so much about ghostly possession as he is about social dispossession, the withering away of the landed aristocracy occasioned by the rise of the middle classes. As the title of James's novel alerts us, he is writing about a turn. His subject is nothing less than a revolution.

(デイヴィッド・コージー　英語コミュニケーション学科)

3 Henry Peter Brougham. Quoted in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, by Raymond Williams. New York: Oxford, 1983 (Revised Edition). (63).

4 Raymond Williams. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford. 1983 (Revised Edition). (63).